DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 146 FL 021 848

TITLE	Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-FL-94-08
PUB DATE	Feb 94
CONTRACT	RR93002010
NOTE	4p.; This digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. "Teacher Research on Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Households," by Norma Gonzales, Luis C. Moll, Martha Floyd-Tenery, Anna Rivera, Patricia Rendon, Raquel Gonzales, and Cathy Amanti.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CLL, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Traits; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Ethnography; *Family Environment; *Minority Groups; Models; Research Projects
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest describes a research model that has shown how classroom practice can be developed, transformed, and enriched by drawing on existing "funds of knowledge" in minority students households. Funds of knowledge refers to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (e.g., skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well being. Through participant-observer visits to minority student households, researchers and teachers became aware of these funds of knowledge. As a result of these research activities, teachers have come to view their students as competent participants in households rich in cognitive resources, and have consequently raised their expectations of students' abilities. Specific sections of the digest discuss the following: researching funds of knowledge, which describes a research project carried out in Tucson, Arizona; teachers as learners and reflexive practitioners, which discusses the difficulties involved in implementing this research model; and funds of knowledge as transformative principle, which highlights the underlying transformative potentials in viewing the households as repositories of funds of knowledge. (VWL)

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National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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ERIC
CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Digest

February 1994

Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households

(EDO-FL-94-08)

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, *Teacher Research on Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Households*, by Norma González, Luis C. Moll, Martha Floyd-Tenery, Anna Rivera, Patricia Rendón, Raquel Gonzales, and Cathy Amanti. Copies of the report are available for $4.00 from Center for Applied Linguistics, NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC.

An underlying assumption of many educational institutions has been that linguistically and culturally diverse working-class students do not emerge from households rich in social and intellectual resources. This inaccurate perception, that diverse minority students have language disadvantages and deficiencies in school-sanctioned knowledge that they bring from the home to the classroom, has too often led to lowered academic expectations for these students.

This digest describes a research model that has shown that classroom practice can be developed, transformed, and enriched by drawing upon the existing *funds of knowledge* in minority students' households. Funds of knowledge refers to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (e.g., skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being (for details, see Greenberg, 1989; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Through participant-observer visits to minority student households, researchers and teachers became aware of these funds of knowledge.

Although teachers have traditionally made home visits to discuss a particular student problem, to pinpoint difficulties with a particular subject matter, or to provide suggestions to parents on helping children with homework, in this model, teachers entered the homes with the purpose of identifying and documenting existing knowledge. They discovered that funds of knowledge are abundant and diverse and may include such areas as farming and animal husbandry, construction, trade, business, and finance. Additionally, teachers who have visited working-class minority households while engaging in collaborative ethnographic reflection have found that pivotal and transformative shifts take place in teachers and in relations between households and schools and between parents and teachers (see González & Amanti, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

Researching Funds of Knowledge

A research project carried out in Tucson, Arizona brought teachers and university-based researchers in education and anthropology together to enter minority households and discover knowledge and other resources therein. The project had three main components:

- **Community:** an ethnographic study of the origin, use, and distribution of funds of knowledge among households in a predominantly Mexican working-class community of Tucson, Arizona;
- **After-school teacher labs:** study groups created to enhance the collaboration between teacher-researchers and university-based researchers, to discuss research findings, and to plan, develop, and support innovations in instruction;
- **Schools:** classroom studies to examine existing methods of instruction and to implement innovations based on the household study and conceptualized in after-school labs.

The community component involved researchers and teachers entering households for the purpose of discerning the household's sociopolitical and economic context, that is, its origins and development, and social and labor histories. Additionally, researchers and teacher-researchers looked at the ways families develop social networks with their environments and with other households, focusing on how these social relationships can facilitate the development and exchange of resources, including funds of knowledge. They found that these relationships are often reciprocal in that each exchange with kinsmen, friends, neighbors, or teachers results in the development or reinforcement of mutual trust. This trust was established and reinforced as the participants shared in practical activities (e.g., home and auto repair, animal husbandry, music) that constantly provide contexts in which learning can occur (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

Specifically, teachers in the Tucson project chose two or three students each at their own discretion. They then conducted three two-hour interviews with each student and his or her family. After each interview, the teachers wrote field notes for discussion in the after-school labs. Also, some teachers wrote a personal field journal to help monitor the progress of their own reflexive process.

The after-school labs provided a setting for forming strategic connections between household fieldwork and classroom practice. Teachers and researchers in the Tucson project met every two weeks to analyze a combination of ethnographic field methods and incorporate participant-observation, open-ended interviewing strategies, life histories, and case studies into the joint inquiry of household and community ethnography. By this means, teachers and researchers shared their observations and experiences, taking turns mentoring each other with the common goal of refining methodology, interpretation, and practice (see González & Amanti, 1992).

Classroom applications emerged from these after-school sessions: ways to weave the knowledge about family and school matters exchanged between the teachers and the families into academic content and lessons. For example, one teacher utilized her awareness of one student's experiences with selling candy from Mexico in the United States by creating a series of interdisciplinary lessons centered around the theme of candy production. During this time, it was discovered that one parent knew how to make Mexican candy, and came to the class to explain the process and help the students make their own candy. By the end of a week, the class had

studied math concepts (e.g., average number of ingredients in U.S. candy compared to Mexican candy), science concepts (e.g., chemical content of candy), health concepts (nutrition), consumer education (how to choose which candy is best), cross-cultural practices in the production of candy, marketing and advertising (e.g., how to price their own candy), and food production. (See Moll et al., 1992 for more information.)

Teachers as Learners and Reflexive Practitioners

Teachers who implement this research model may initially have difficulty entering the homes and reporting their observations and insights as researchers. First, they must often struggle to cast off the notion of educational research as having to be based on quantifiable variables that are meticulously controlled. The teachers need to recognize that reflexively oriented work needs to begin with "the understanding that systematic thinking about one's own experiences is a valid source of some knowledge and insight" (Segal, 1990, p.122).

Second, they must overcome the discomfort of entering a household, as one teacher in the Tucson project explained, "like a private investigator," asking a wide range of questions, from where the family members work to what they are cooking for dinner that evening. However, researchers have noticed that teachers, by virtue of their role in the children's lives, have more ready entrée to the households than anthropologists do. Teachers in the Tucson project were welcomed into the households with respect and honor, and the families evinced no suspicion of motives or mistrust of how the information gathered was to be used.

Third, teachers may have to overcome the possibility of gaining understanding and then falling into the trap of inaction. Realization of the formidable social and structural limitations and challenges that these families face can lead to a feeling of helpless pessimism. However, once the teachers get to know their students and their families better and engage in reflective discourse in after-school labs this hopelessness can be dispelled. As a result, teachers are more likely to view the households as repositories of funds of knowledge capable of providing opportunities for learning than to see them as hindrances to academic progress.

A fourth difficulty of becoming a teacher-researcher is that significant time and energy outside of the classroom are required. This model requires many after-school hours spent conducting interviews in the home and writing and discussing observations and insights in the labs. Yet, in spite of the strain of the tasks, the teachers reported it was a worthwhile process, since they were able to gain insights that might have otherwise been missed. Moreover, the study groups helped facilitate these insights by offering a safe, non-judgmental environment for thinking aloud about classroom practice as well as about household functions.

Funds of Knowledge as Transformative Principle

Teachers have voiced two underlying transformative potentials in viewing the households as repositories of funds of knowledge. The first challenges traditional notions of culture as only being represented through dances, food, folklore, and the like. As a result of these home visits, teachers begin to view culture as a dynamic process rather than a static end state. Teachers in the Tucson project learned, among other things, how households network in informal market exchanges and how cross-border activities enabled their students to act as mini-ethnographers. They also recognized that students acquire a multi-dimensional depth and breadth from their participation in household life (Moll et al., 1992).

The second transformative principle of this research debunks the pervasive idea that linguistically and culturally diverse working-class minority households lack worthwhile knowledge and experiences. Teachers who have participated in these visits have been changed as a result of getting to know families that have survived against overwhelming odds or made great sacrifices to gain a better education for their children. Consequently, these teachers now view their students with more respect and understanding, and are better able to tie the academic content to the formerly hidden talents and abilities they have discovered in their minority students.

Conclusion

As a result of these research activities, teachers have come to view their students as competent participants in households rich in cognitive resources, and have consequently raised their expectations of their students' abilities. While it is generally advisable to tailor the project model to the particular social and historical conditions of the site, the following minimal conditions are suggested for teachers who may want to plan and implement similar funds of knowledge research projects:

- Theoretical teacher preparation—believing that households contain abundant social and intellectual resources;
- Home visits as participant-observers—entering the home as a learner, willing to interact, prepared to document what is learned;
- Teacher labs—acting as a center for discussion, reflection, analysis, and a catalyst for ideas about teaching; and
- Voluntary teacher participation—allowing teachers to have maximum control over the project so the work does not become an undesirable imposition.

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This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.